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SUBJECT: HELMAND SIX MONTH UPDATE - GOVERNANCE IMPROVES DESPITE
SECURITY AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES

Summary

11. (SBU) Helmand remains one of the most violent provinces in Afghanistan but the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Afghan security forces continue to expand security across the province. The Governor Mangal overcame strong political challenges from Helmand powerbrokers and governance made steady progress under his direction. The Provincial Council (PC) improved its work and supported efforts to build governance capacity. Enemy Forces (EFs) were pushed away from Garmsir, Gereshk and Musa Qala district centers and the Nad Ali district was returned to government control. Freedom of movement has improved for local residents but those working for the government or ISAF continue to face significant security challenges. During this reporting period, numerous development projects progressed and several large government and security projects were completed. The governor strongly supported counter narcotics efforts and his Food Zone program eventually enrolled over 33,000 farmers into wheat production and away from poppy.

Security

12. (SBU) Helmand province saw extensive fighting throughout the reporting period and EFs overcame local police elements to establish a strong presence in the Nad Ali District, located just west of Lashkar Gah. EFs used this area as a staging area and launched several unsuccessful attacks against Lashkar Gah in October 2008. ISAF and Afghan security forces performed well together and inflicted a serious defeat on EFs. In December 2008, ISAF and Afghan forces launched a large-scale operation, pushed EFs out of Nad Ali and began stabilization efforts immediately. EFs continue to engage security forces in the area and appear determined to maintain a presence in the district.

13. (SBU) In Garmsir, Gershk and Lashkar Gah there was a noticeable reduction in enemy activity, and security around these cities has improved. Residents have more freedom of movement and the economies of these areas have improved. The Musa Qala district remains kinetically active but the district center is stable and the Afghan police have assumed greater responsibility for city security. Sangin remains a large security challenge, and the removal of the U.S. Marines in October 2008 has hampered stabilization activities. EFs remain close to the district center and regularly engage the ISAF forces based there. The provincial and district leadership continue to lobby for additional Afghan Army forces to help improve the situation but none have been deployed to the area. Without sizeable Afghan Army reinforcements, the security situation in and around Sangin will remain stalemated.

Political

¶4. (SBU) During the second half of 2008, Governor Mangal came under intense political pressure from former and current members of the Afghan Government. Former governor Sher Mohammed Akunzada (SMA), who is now a senator, and former Helmand chief of police, Abdul Rhaman Jan (ARJ), joined forces to try to undermine Mangal's administration. Each maintains a support base in Helmand and used these elements to lobby Kabul for Mangal's removal. The collapse of local security forces in Nad Ali was directly attributed to the SMA/ARJ network and the organization tried to stir up public opposition to ongoing ISAF operations. Following several incidents where civilian casualties resulted from clearance operations, the organization falsified casualty figures and used this information to try to unseat Mangal. On other occasions, the group spread rumors Mangal had fled Helmand and had resigned his position.

¶5. (SBU) Throughout this political assault, Mangal waged an aggressive media campaign to defend his reform initiatives, and he initiated a sustained public outreach campaign. From August 2008 through January 2009, Mangal regularly visited district centers with members of the Provincial Council and various line directors. He successfully used these events to speak to thousands of Helmand residents and often organized large media events to initiate new development projects and celebrate the completion of others. These well-crafted visits built political momentum for his administration and won over Helmand residents. These twin initiatives combined with excellent political support from the PRT allowed Mangal to overcome the political challenges, and he has now set himself as the dominant political force in Helmand province.

Governance

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¶6. (SBU) The Helmand provincial government continues to be largely ineffective, but the Helmand directors of Health and Education improved their operations and increased delivery of services. The PC celebrated the opening of their new office/shura hall in October 2008 and this facility has improved the group's operations. They are now holding regular meetings with their constituents and the shura hall is the preferred venue for the large outreach shuras organized by the governor and the PC. Over the past several months, the PC leadership has become more assertive and is beginning to organize additional outreach events. They now ask for detailed briefings from the PRT on security and development issues and their regular attendance at shuras in the districts has raised the group's profile.

¶7. (SBU) Mangal has tried unsuccessfully to remove multiple Helmand line directors, but told PRTOFF that many of these officials have strong political protection in Kabul and their removal is not possible. On several occasions, he has tried to fire the directors of Agriculture and Rural Rehabilitation and Development but said he cannot generate the political support from Kabul to replace them. At the district level, the governor has replaced the district administrators of Gereshk, Kajaki and Sangin with positive results. The new district administrators were selected with support from the local communities and all have worked well to improve security in their areas. They also played key roles in the voter registration process, ensuring the effort was initiated and well protected for the duration.

Development

¶8. (SBU) During the reporting period development efforts continued across central Helmand, and several important projects were completed and other ventures initiated. Construction of the Bost Airfield facility is advancing well - and when completed this spring - will significantly improve civil aviation and support expanded agricultural exports. The completion of the provincial council building and the provincial police headquarters has significantly increased the capacity of both the local government and law enforcement community. Both opening events were major political

opportunities for the governor and left a clear impression on local residents that large-scale development will progress in Helmand. All development initiatives in Helmand received significant support from Mangal and district leadership. The PRT found itself under regular pressure from Helmand officials to push forward road and power projects. Even in the less secure areas, there is a sense of urgency to move development projects along as quickly as possible.

Counter Narcotics

¶9. (SBU) In the last six months, Helmand residents witnessed Governor Mangal wage a daily assault against the Helmand narcotics industry. At every public and private venue, Mangal and his staff hammered away at the drug trade and on numerous occasions publicly shamed leading narcotic industry figures. His consistent message that drug production is the root of corruption and poor security in the province found a receptive audience within a large portion of the Helmand population. Governor Mangal organized large media events to announce the start of Poppy Eradication Force (PEF) and Governor-led Eradication (GLE) operations in the province, and staged several large drug burns with media representatives on hand to ensure his message of zero tolerance for poppy reached well beyond Helmand province.

¶10. (SBU) Mangal combined his zero tolerance for drug production with strong support for alternative livelihood programs. He received excellent support from USAID and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to help launch the Food Zone program that provided high quality wheat seed and fertilizer to almost 33,000 Helmand farmers. This unprecedented effort was intended to encourage farmers to return to traditional agriculture and was a direct shot at the narco-barons who use their drug revenue to destabilize Helmand. The Food Zone program was a strong example of provincial authorities listening to their residents and developing a plan with the support of the development agencies at the PRT. If the Food Zone program helps reduce poppy cultivation, there will be requests to continue this effort.

Comment

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¶11. (SBU) Security, development and governance improved in Helmand province despite the severe political and military challenges. Governor Mangal dominated Helmand political events and he astutely outmaneuvered his political opposition, leaving them in much weaker positions. Mangal has tremendous ambitions for his administration and he is already pushing the U.S., UK and Danish missions to deliver more military and development support. He is determined to bring the rest of the Helmand districts under government control and he wants to deliver large-scale development projects that he can use to strengthen his political position.

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